



Joint Select Committee on Road Safety

Inquiry into Road Safety – 14 October 2021

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

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National Rural Health Alliance

- 1. I recall in the last inquiry that we ran that there was evidence about the incidence of sleep apnoea in long-haul truck drivers. Is there a greater incidence? And, if there is, why is that the case?**

The National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) thanks the Committee for these questions on notice. A range of studies have been conducted in Australia and elsewhere on obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) in commercial truck drivers compared to the rest of the population. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare notes that large-scale studies on the prevalence of OSA in the national population are not available in Australia¹. However, studies suggest that OSA is present in approximately 3-7 per cent of the general population.^{2,3} In comparison, it is prevalent in approximately 17-32 per cent of commercial truck drivers^{4,5,6,7}. Australian research has also shown that in general, truck drivers are unable to accurately identify whether they have OSA based on self-report alone, and that they also under-report their levels of fatigue and sleepiness.⁸

It is well-recognised that being overweight or obese is a risk factor for OSA⁹. The Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport published its final report from its inquiry into the importance of a viable, safe, sustainable and efficient road transport industry in August 2021.¹⁰ The report identifies the transport and logistics industry as being one of the highest risk industries for work-related injury and disease in Australia, and that being overweight or obese, less active and sitting for long periods are all hazards for work-related injury and disease. The report also states that 54 per cent of truck drivers are obese, compared to 32 per cent of the general population.

In a Finnish study from May 2021, it was found that not only is OSA common in commercial truck drivers, but that approximately five per cent of commercial truck drivers experience a significant inability to remain awake while inactive (as they are when driving).¹¹

Higher rates of obesity and OSA in commercial truck drivers creates a hazard on Australian roads. We wish to refer back to Recommendation 5 in our submission to emphasise the importance of addressing sleep deprivation and fatigue in heavy vehicle users, and that long-haul truck drivers be targeted specifically with technology-assisted monitoring and other approaches that look at overall health and wellbeing.

- 2. Do you know if there've there have been any studies done? I'm particularly keen around the sleep deprivation issue. We all know that, if you're sleep deprived, you're not concentrating well. And if you spend your whole day, or the majority of your working week, on the road in a truck, you're a risk to not only to yourself but other participants on the road. Are there any studies that have been done that you could point to for us?**

Research demonstrates that fatigue and sleep deprivation are contributors to a large proportion of Australian road deaths – the Austroads Research Report, *National View on Regional and Remote Road Safety* (2019) cites a large body of work on this issue.¹² This report cites evidence suggesting that it contributes to approximately 10 per cent to 30 per cent of road deaths, and that its contribution is higher in regional and remote areas.

This report also notes that fatigue and sleep deprivation while driving are significant risk factors for road accidents in heavy vehicle drivers, particularly due to long work hours and driving distances, evening and morning shifts, and a high incidence of untreated OSA. likely to be involved in a crash if they are driving in The Alliance reiterates from its submission that this report is one of the most important sources of information for improving regional and remote road safety in Australia available to date.

Australian research also shows that truck drivers with OSA are over three times more likely to be involved in a crash than truck drivers without OSA.¹³ Truck drivers in Australia can effectively reduce their risk of crashing by taking regular breaks during long-haul journeys (irrespective of caffeine intake or self-rated sleepiness), avoiding driving in the middle of the night, and using vehicle safety technologies such as cruise control and antilock braking systems.¹⁴

References

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